

十九

A stick in a temple
decided my fate
the mainland of China
would just have to wait
“You need to go home
to a far distant shore
we know you’ll come back
to learn even more”



Chapter 19 – “Religious Medley” – Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism

Growing up in Tulsa, Oklahoma, the buckle of the Bible Belt, the only religion I knew was Christianity. In the Christian church, there was Catholicism and there were a multitude of Protestant denominations. Each one had their own special set of beliefs and interpretations. We had a couple of Jewish synagogues in Tulsa, but I always thought that one had to be Jewish to go to synagogue. I knew there were other religions in the world, and I assumed they had denominations as well. What I wasn't prepared for when I went to Taiwan and Hong Kong, was the blending of religion with philosophy, ancestor worship, and traditional folk religions.

One of the things I knew I wanted to study when I went to Taiwan was Taoism a.k.a. Daoism. When I explained that to a teacher at FuJen University, he found a book for me entitled 老子 *Lǎozǐ* and it was written in Chinese. Fortunately It had both the classical text 文言文 *wényánwén* (sort of like Latin is to English) and an accompanying explanation in the common vernacular, which is called 白話 *báihuà*. Local friends had pointed out Taoist temples around Taipei and I thought these would be the perfect places to go to learn more about the teachings of Laozi and Zhuangzi. I was taken aback to find what appeared to be a huge disconnect between the Taosim I had been reading and the Taoism that was being practiced as a religion in Taiwan. I learned that in Chinese, what I had read was called 道家 *Dào Jiā*, the “philosophy” of Taosim. What I was seeing in the Taiwan Taoist temples was called 道教 *Dào Jiào*, the “religion” of Daoism. What I was told was that although some people in Taiwan adhered strictly to tenets of Taoism or Buddhism, far more blended one or both of those “religions” with various folk religions which had evolved in Taiwan as people from south-eastern Fujian came in and joined the aboriginal Taiwanese (原住民 *Yuánzhùmín*), the Austronesian people who had arrived in Taiwan some 8,000 years earlier.

Walking around Hong Kong, I found there to be numerous temples which did not call themselves Buddhist, Taoist or Confucianist, but were dedicated to historical or quasi historical figures. General Che Kung aka 車公 *Chēgōng* helped to suppress a rebellion in the Sung Dynasty. 關羽 *Guānyǔ* aka 關帝 *Guān Dì* is often referred to as the God of War. He was a great warrior during the Eastern Han Dynasty an the Period of the Three Kingdoms.

My personal favorite has always been 觀音 *Guānyīn* a.k.a. Kwun Yum whose first manifestations resembled a male figure, but who is now most often portrayed as the “Goddess of Mercy.”



Since Hong Kong has historically been a home for fisherman, some of the most visited temples are dedicated to Tin Hau, aka 天后 Tiān Hòu who, according to the stories, was a young girl from a fishing village in Fujian.

A popular place of worship in Hong Kong is the 黃大仙祠 Huáng Dà Xiān cí aka Wong Tai Sin Temple. According to legend, Wong Tai Sin (黃大仙) nee 黃初平 Huáng Chū Píng was a poor shepherd who became a Daoist priest in Zhejiang province in the 4th century CE. One of the largest and most visited temples in Hong Kong, it is dedicated to Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism.

The sense of smell may be one of our most powerful connections to the past. Incense (香 xiāng) burns inside temples throughout China. When walking down side streets in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China, I smile when I get a waft of incense which burns 24-7 in many temples. Incense is burned to please the gods, immortals, and ancestors. Families often include incense in their praying. They will buy sticks of incense, light several sticks at once, and pray (拜拜 bài bài) by bowing several times in front of an altar holding the burning incense in their hands. I've been told that incense also helps to keep away the mosquitoes.

At the Wong Tai Sin temple in Hong Kong, anyone can come in and pray in any of a myriad of spaces. You can also have your fortune read by men and women in Cantonese, Mandarin, and in English. The most popular way of finding your fortune is by using Fortune Sticks (Kau Cim aka 求籤 Qiú Qiān). At Wong Tai Sin, you can have a professional fortune teller help you or you can borrow sticks and do it yourself. There are 100 sticks in a bamboo container with the #'s 1-100 written on them. There is a way to shake the container until finally one stick comes out. To make sure that your fortune is correct, you then drop the 琰杯 Jiǎn Bēi blocks. These two wooden blocks are in the shape of crescents with a flat side and a rounded side. The way they land on the floor tells you whether your fortune is suitable or not. Once you've determined that your number is correct, you take it to a window and they will give you a poem. It's up to you and/or your fortune teller to interpret your poem so that it will answer the question you asked. Nowadays if you have the instructions read, "Concentrate hard, ask Wong Tai Sin, and click." It took me to number 54, the Butterfly Dream of Master Zhuang.

莊子酣眠成蝶夢

翩翩飛入百花叢

The wiseman was deep asleep when he dreamt of himself becoming a butterfly

天香採得歸來後

猶在高床暖枕中

His wings fluttered as he flew in the blossoms of the flowerbed

Having collected the heavenly scents from the fragrant blooms

He found himself laying inside his warm beddings all the while